

BOOK REVIEW

The Cypria, By MALCOM DAVIES. Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2019. Hellenic Studies 83, Center for Hellenic Studies. Pp. 10 + 213. Paperback, \$26.28. ISBN: 978-0-674-23791-9.

The revival of the Epic Cycle that I was delighted to announce some years ago (*Studies on the Epic Cycle*, F. Serra: Pisa-Rome, 2015, vol. I, 11-13) is riding high: Davies' monograph on the *Cypria*, following his similar work on the *Aethiopis* (*The Aethiopis: Neo-Neoanalysis Reanalyzed*, Cambridge MA-London: Harvard University Press, 2016; cf. BMCR 2017.04.43), is another step forward on the path of rediscovery and valorization of this largely lost poetry, which does not cease to arouse interest despite – or perhaps because of – its fragmentary state.

After an introduction concerning the authorship, the meaning of the title, the date, the relationship with the *Iliad*, the reception and the “literary quality” of the *Cypria* (1-11), Davies provides a detailed commentary of the fragments of the poem, taking account of the external evidence that contributes to their interpretation – and sometimes complicates it. The late dating (first half of the 6th century) works well, in the light of the “modern” language of the fragments; nevertheless, since we are talking about an epic poem of the archaic period, ~~maybe it was~~ it would have been worth spending a few words on its composition as a process – a “stratified” process, started one or two centuries before the completion of its “final” draft. Against this backdrop, the problem of the authorship would appear in a very different light, while the hypothesis of a title ~~raising~~ rising from a cultural community, “a Cypriote family of epic poets” (as Davies puts it, following Lloyd-Jones), would be therefore strengthened. The assessment of the “literary quality” of a poem reduced to a few fragments that do not exceed about fifty lines, without any chance to look upon the narrative structure (while epos is a narrative genre!), sounds a little weird; and yet it is not fair to share *a priori*, and without confirming evidence, the negative verdict pronounced by Lloyd-Jones and Griffin. It would rather have been interesting to trace the ancient origin of this prejudice, getting back to Plato and Aristotle, and then to the Alexandrian criticism. Anyway, a possible answer to the question concerning literary quality comes from the wide

reception of the *Cypria* (fully recognized by Davies under the heading “influence”) in the following centuries.

The commentary of the fragments and of the evidence – mainly but not exclusively Proclus’ summaries – extends through five chapters, focusing on the major themes of the poem, notably the origins of the Trojan War (by far the longer section: 13-119), the assembling of the expedition (121-133), the episodes of Telephus in Theutrania and of Iphigenia at Aulis, acknowledged by Davies as “two retardations” (135-151), the arrival of the Achaeans at Troy (153-170) and the first nine years of war (171-188). The fragments of uncertain location find place in the last chapter (188-195), followed by four short appendices (197-204), three of which deal with a few specific points of the *Cypria*, i.e. the childhood of Achilles, the consultations of the Delphic oracle and the possible presence of a catalogue of Helen’s suitors; the last appendix includes the texts and the translations of some *testimonia* mentioned, but not fully quoted, in the course of the book.

The commentary is mostly rigorous and balanced, especially on linguistic and textual issues (e.g. 23-28, on F1; 87-92, on F7), though the lacuna after the first line of the fragment 5 (68-69) should be removed, given that the plural participle *πλεξάμεναι* at the beginning of v. 2 may well be connected to the expression *ἢ δὲ σὺν ἀμφιπόλοισι φιλομειδῆς Ἀφροδίτη* (v. 1). The reconstruction of the possible contexts of the fragments and of individual parts of the plot is often reliable (e.g. 36-46, on the wedding of Peleus and Thetis; 73-76, on Paris’ history, without “exposure and return”) but sometimes debatable (e.g. 147-149, on the daughters of Agamemnon). I cannot get into it here, but let me dwell on a single point: among the subjects of Nestor’s digression, mentioned by Proclus (*Chrest.* 114-117 Severyns), most of which can be related to the abduction of Helen by Paris for being illicit unions with tragic consequences, “the madness of Heracles” is not really “the most baffling,” as claimed by Davies (122-127). In fact, it is evidence of the dangerousness of the goddesses, such as Aphrodite, who helped Paris to abduct Helen, and especially Juno, who became his enemy after the judgement. Maybe Nestor intends to say that Paris will be ruined by Juno, which means that Menelaus will have his revenge. We may wonder if Nestor and Menelaus know about the judgement of Paris: actually, it is not probable; but either way the reader knows. This could stimulate a reflection on the nature and the purpose of Nestor’s digression in the *Cypria*, compared to the role of this character as an intradiegetic narrator in the *Iliad* (cf. K. Dickson, *Nestor: Poetic Memory in Greek Epic*, New York and London, 1995).

The relationship of the *Cypria* to the *Iliad* is a major issue, which Davies addresses in the introduction and at various points along the book (4-6, 28-31, 131-133, 186-188, and *passim*). In my view, this is an ill-posed problem, insofar as Davies only considers two possibilities, given the later dating of the *Cypria*. On the one hand, “some passages undoubtedly show that the *Iliad*’s poet was aware of various mythical personages and events that seems to have found a place within the *Cypria*,” which means that the authors of both poems drew upon a common source, that is the oral tradition; but this seems to Davies an “unambitious finding.” On the other hand, the poet of the *Cypria* imitates the *Iliad* for several details. As I see it, *tertium datur*. I think indeed that the *Iliad* is modelled on the *Cypria* on some points, just as the latter imitated the former on others: a circular process that would be inconceivable for all other literary works, but that is possible in the framework of the archaic Greek epic, due to the stratified composition of those poems and to the “fluidity” of their evolution in the aural phase. In fact, this is already implied in the common relationship of the *Iliad* and the *Cypria* with the oral tradition, which Davies readily admits, but that is a more ambitious finding than he thinks. Although the *Cypria* studied by Davies is a poem written in the 6th century, we know that their author(s) did nothing more than put together and “stitch up” (even introducing some innovative points) preexisting – in oral and/or written form – individual songs. The oral tradition, which Davies agrees to consider as the common source of both poems, is not to be seen as an abstract notion, as a cultural substratum shared by the whole community: it is rather a set of songs handed down first in oral form, then put in writing. This is why an early version of the *Cypria* (should we speak of *Ur-Cypria*, to avoid misunderstandings?) existed long before the poem of the 6th century. I wonder if we can study the latter, and in particular its relationship with the *Iliad*, deliberately ignoring the former or dismissing it under the generic definition of “oral tradition.” Moreover, even if we decline to postulate the existence of that early version of the *Cypria*, yet we cannot reduce the issue to a “bilateral comparison.” The catalogues of the Greek ships and of the Trojan allies, for instance, were likely two *topoi* originally shared by several songs concerning the Trojan legend: does it make sense to ask whether the *Iliad* took them from the *Cypria*, or vice-versa? Can we really go even further and follow “those numerous scholars who allege that one” of the two catalogues of the Trojan allies “must be spurious”?

These points of disagreement do not prevent me from recognizing the high value of Davies’ book, which considerably enriches the panorama of the studies

on the Epic Cycle. One of his merits is indeed to discuss in depth several important works on the subject; and yet the bibliography is far from exhaustive. For example, Davies would have found something interesting in A. Debiasi, *L'epica perduta: Eumelo, il Ciclo, l'occidente*, Rome, 2004, 112-122; E. Barker, "Momos Advises Zeus. Changing Representations of *Cypria* Fragment 1," in E. Cingano & L. Milano (eds.), *Papers on Ancient Literatures: Greece, Rome and the Near East*, Padua, 2008, 33-73; P. Verzina, "Zeus e il vantaggio troiano: tracce di elaborazioni della tradizione nell'*Iliade*," *Emerita*, 83, 2015, 195-219.

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